



Good Teachers: A Lesson from Ramona Quimby

by Valerie Bang-Jensen

Through the images of good teachers in literature, we can discern qualities that make certain teachers unique, outstanding, and memorable in the experiences of students.

Each September, teachers reach for their favorite children's books to share with their new classes with the intent to bring the power of good literature into their new learning communities. Books about school, friendship, families, and growing up all help shape students' expectations for reading about things that matter to them. The experiences of book characters are powerful because they become universal reference points; millions of readers feel a comradeship with

Harry Potter (Rowling 1998) and know his specific fondness for chocolate frogs.

Well-read and well-known books also can provide us, as teachers, with common touchstones about good teaching. Many authors have provided descriptions of the varied ways teachers in their stories have affected the lives of their students, and we come away from the book with a sense of having met a "good" teacher. This article goes beyond some accepted

definitions of good teaching and explores the possibilities that teachers in children's literature invite us to consider.

Who is a good teacher? What do good teachers do?

In a sense, we are all teachers. We teach our dogs to sit and fetch. We teach our sisters how to braid their hair, our brothers how to tie a tie. We teach our children how to ride their bikes, budget their allowance, and drive a car. We teach our parents (no matter which generation) to use the Internet and program their VCRs. We experience successes and failures in our attempts, and sometimes (especially once we have our own children), we wonder how one teacher copes with the needs and demands of 25 children simultaneously.

All of us remember some good teachers. Researchers have even documented and described characteristics of good teachers. Some of these include: "mission-driven," passionate, positive, exhibit leadership, possess what Kunin called "withitness" or the ability to attend to many factors simultaneously, instructional effectiveness, content area knowledge, street smarts, and a substantive intellectual life, among others (McEwan 2001).

Though we can identify and try to teach and nurture these elements, they cannot be used as a formula. It is the daily infusion of these qualities into classroom contexts that allows teachers to develop these traits in a highly personal way. It is the personalization of these common good qualities that makes certain teachers unique and outstanding in our memories and in the experiences of our students.

As educators develop from novice teachers to experienced and

master teachers, they develop their own repertoire of strategies and interactions with children and touch their lives in personal ways that cannot necessarily be described by research. Some of the positive ways teachers may influence students are revealed in children's books. Favorite stories offer descriptions of the many intangible ways that teachers affect students.

Teachers help shape our views of school.

We all want students to start off like Ramona Quimby. Ramona, new to Kindergarten, is lucky to fall in love with her teacher. Miss Binney



is perfect; she loves how Ramona makes her capital Q's look like cats with whiskers, and she always notices little things like how "Ramona makes her O's like fat balloons. Ramona enjoyed Miss Binney's descriptions of the letters of the alphabet and listened for them while she worked." The first time Ramona prints her name correctly, Miss Binney tells her, "good work, Ramona," and Ramona hugs herself with happiness and love for Miss Binney (Cleary 1968, 73-74).

Teachers can help us with life's challenges, like moving and belonging.

In *The Private Notebook of Katie Roberts, Age 11*, Katie moves

from New York City to rural Texas. At lunch on the first day of school, Amy writes in her notebook, "I started to cry. Mr. Keyes was nice. He shared a cupcake from his lunchbox. Chocolate. I told him that I have no friends. He said that you have to BE a friend to HAVE a friend" (Hest 1995, 51).

In *Flip-Flop Girl*, Vinnie and



her family move to a new town after the death of her father. She enters her new classroom for the first time and is unsure whether to join the circle on the rug. "Mr. Clayton put his arm out as though to draw her into the circle. She went around to where he sat on the floor. 'Push back a little, Brian,' he said to the boy on his left. 'Make way for Vinnie.' He smiled up at her. Vinnie's face burned with pleasure. The teacher liked her. Even in this dumb, dirty old school, there

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was a teacher who was nice and who liked her" (Paterson 1994, 18–19).

Teachers are memorable for their passions about their subjects and the ways they share them with their students.

Katie Roberts' teacher inspires her with his choice of read-aloud fiction. "My favorite thing in school is when Mr. Keyes reads from his fat



book of short stories. I like the ones by Mr. O'Henry. This writer likes to trick you at the end. There's always a surprise. When I grow up, I am going to write stories that trick you at the end" (Hest 1995, 20).

In *Hold Fast to Dreams*, Dee has just moved from urban Baltimore to a suburban Connecticut middle school. Her comments about a poet's life are met with excitement by her English teacher. "I'd never had a teacher go on with me like that. Mr. McCurdy, crusty and old as he was, knew a lot about Langston Hughes. He looked pleased that I knew almost as much as he did" (Pinkney 1995, 11).

Good teachers may model their passion for learning in idiosyncratic ways. Thirteen-year-old Salamanca tries to describe her new English teacher to her grandparents: "Mr. Birkway was mighty strange. I didn't know what to make of him. I thought he might have a

few squirrels in the attic of his brain. He was one of those energetic teachers who loved his subject half to death and leaped about the room dramatically, waving his arms and clutching his chest and whomping people on the back. He said, "Brilliant!" and "Wonderful!" and "Terrific!" . . . You felt as if his whole purpose in life was to stand there and listen to you, and you alone" (Creech 1994, 80).

Some highly individualistic students have remembered teachers as their advocates and role models.

Consider this excerpt from *My Life as a Fifth-Grade Comedian* (Levy 1997, 3): "Mr. Matous can be pretty funny. He *likes* to laugh. Some teachers don't, but when you



get one who does, you're golden. It's Mr. Matous's first year of teaching. He's the kind of teacher who thinks all kids are worth saving. Everybody in the class knows that I am the type of kid who is too much for Mr. Matous to handle. It's made for an interesting year."

Exceptional teachers shape the curriculum and their methods to meet the needs of their students. They invite students to join them in making learning come alive.

Katherine Paterson, in her Newbery Award winning *Bridge to Terabithia*, conveys the importance of music class in the lives of



her characters. Fifth-grader Jess manages "to endure the whole boring week of school for that one half-hour on Friday afternoons. . . . Miss Edmunds would play her guitar and let the kids take turns on the Autoharp, the triangles, cymbals, tambourines, and bongo drum. Lord, could they ever make a racket! All the teachers hated Fridays. And a lot of the kids pretended to. But Jess knew what fakes they were. . . . They sat at their desks all Friday, their hearts thumping with anticipation as they listened to the joyful pandemonium pouring out from the teachers' room, [and] spent their allotted half hours with Miss Edmunds under the spell of her wild beauty and in the snare of her enthusiasms" (Paterson 1977, 13).

A new teacher is coming to Avonlea School in the early 1900s. Anne of Green Gables can hardly wait, although the community has some doubts. "I've heard such exciting things about the new teacher. . . . Friday afternoons . . . Miss Stacy takes them all to the woods for a field day and they study ferns and flowers and birds. And they have physical culture exercises every morning and evening. Mrs. Lynde says she never heard of

such goings-on and it all comes of having a lady teacher. But I think it must be splendid and I believe I shall find that Miss Stacy is a kindred spirit" (Montgomery 1908, 189).

In a remote town in Alaska in 1948, teachers rarely make it through a school year. Miss Agnes



is different from the other teachers the town has had. For one thing, she can build a fire in the school stove, and for another, she insists that a deaf child in the village attend class. The main character, Fred, especially appreciates Miss Agnes's attempts to make the reading curriculum relevant to their lives. "We had these little books all the other teachers used, with Dick, Jane, and Sally. They had a mother and a father, and that's what they called them: Mother and Father. We never heard that before. And there was a kitten named Puff and a dog named Spot. . . . They lived in a town with lots of trees along a cement road, and the houses were really big. All they did was play, those kids. The boy had short pants on, and the girl had yellow hair. . . . When you read those books, it was kind of embarrassing. 'Look, look, look. See Spot run.' They talked kind of stupid like that. . . . So Miss Agnes put those books away, and she made some other little books for us to read. A different one for each

of us. My book said this: 'There once was a little girl named Fred. Her real name was Frederika, and she lived on the Koyukuk River with her mother, Anna, and her sister, Bokko.' It was so good, I read it over and over, and that's how I learned those words" (Hill 2000, 90–91).

Sometimes the teachers who have the highest expectations are the ones who help us discover ourselves. They are the ones we will remember.

In *Flip-Flop Girl*, Vinnie is so excited by an assignment to write a poem that she imagines herself as a famous poet delivering an acceptance speech for an award: "I especially want to thank my fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Wayne Clayton, who first recognized that in a shy little fourth-grader new to his class, there was buried deep down the poet who stands here tonight" (Paterson 1994, 29).



In *True Believer*, 15 year-old LaVaughn is identified as having potential, and she is recommended for a special after-school tutorial called "Grammar Build-Up." The first day she attends, she sizes up Dr. Rose, the teacher: "This Dr. Rose is tall and very good manners looking [*sic*], she wears a don't-mess-with-me suit and very tiny shiny earrings in her ears. She eyeballs each of the 13 of us and we get quiet" (Wolff 2001, 37).

Grammar drills follow at a rapid pace, and LaVaughn is exhausted. "This is dizzying and the teacher knows it, and she says in her exact voice, 'Some of you will invent excuses not to come to this after-school elective class. You will find other endeavors that are more immediately gratifying. The rest of you will struggle and be exalted in your learning. And, by the way, you will become taller, should you choose to remain.' She takes another deep breath. 'In this room are fewer than one percent of the students in this school. Be aware that you are the one percent. Good day.' Outside the door, me and Ronell and four others roll our eyes and we laugh all quiet, not a sound, just six stumbling bodies going up the hallway, all bent over with laughter, trying not to have our sinuses pop. Even [*sic*] two of us were boys. Me and Ronell agree we will go back for more" (Wolff 2001, 40–41).

Like LaVaughn and Ronell, teachers will continue to go back into schools for more. I hope that, like the universal teachers we have all shared through literature, they mark their places in their students' memories.

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